

Book of James—James 3

The Tongue; True Wisdom

I. Additional Scriptures/Notes...

Chapter 3... “In chapter 3 this demand for a productive faith is continued, but with a difference. James insists that a living faith also must produce an inward result, the development of self-control. And this power of self-control is tested most readily in the matter of controlling the tongue. James agreed with Jesus (Mt 12:34-37) that a man's words are the revelation of his inner character. As the organ of speech, a man's use of his tongue provides a ready revelation of his inner nature, for 'out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh' (Mt 12:34). The power of speech is one of God's greatest gifts to men, and believers must be on constant guard against the perverted use of this mighty gift. James relates the control of the tongue to the Christian teacher (v. 1) and then to the believer generally (v. 1)” [D. Edmond Hiebert, *Tests of a living Faith*, p. 203].

3:1... be not many masters—“Then I'll never be a teacher, you may affirm. But let me remind any who think to avoid condemnation through avoiding responsibility: God instructed the older women to teach the younger. God instructed the elders to be 'apt to teach.' God instructed parents to teach their children, and condemned parents who did not do so. Although the 'rabbi' (teacher) referred to here can be a teacher resident: in a congregation, or a traveling missionary, James in no way indicates that the teacher is an officer within the church. Rather, he is one who takes on a work and a responsibility. To try to avoid entirely the responsibility of teaching might in some ways be comparable to the person who says, 'I fear to become a Christian lest I should backslide and my later state as a sinner be worse than my present state as a sinner’” [Donald Fream, *A Chain of Jewels from James & Jude*, Bible Study Textbook Series, p. 117]. ||||| “If people are taught, it is implied that there must be teachers. In fact, both the need to be taught and the need to be teachers are set out in Hebrews 5:12-14. However, there has ever been a temptation to some to teach, who, 'desiring to be teachers of the law, they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm' (1 Tim 1:7)” [Garland Elkins, “The Teacher and His Tongue,” in *Studies in James*, edited by Dub McClish, p. 134].

3:2... in many things we offend all. ASV has here: “*For in many things we all stumble.*” ESV has: “*For we all stumble in many ways.*” “We all offend. The word here rendered offend, means to stumble, to fall; then to err, to fail in duty; and the meaning here is, that all were liable to commit error, and that this consideration should induce men to be cautious in seeking an office where an error would be likely to do so much injury” [*Barnes' Notes on the Bible*].

3:3... bits in the horses' mouths—“Such a simple illustration makes the point quite clear. When we have controlled the direction of the horse's mouth, we have controlled the direction of his entire body. There is no need to make the application to the tongue and our own bodies, for any creature who could speak could also understand the meaning. Our action, however, is often as though we did not understand. We so glibly and carelessly use the tongue, as if it were of no consequence whatsoever” [Donald Fream, *A Chain of Jewels from James & Jude*, Bible Study Textbook Series, p. 118].

3:6... and the tongue is a fire—Cf., Ps 57:4; 120:3-4; Prov 16:27; 26:18-21. **a world of iniquity**—“James further characterizes the tongue as 'the world of iniquity' (*ho kosmos*

tes adikias). The term 'world' has a root meaning of adorning or adornment; it is used of a woman's attire in 1 Peter 3:3" [D. Edmond Hiebert, *Tests of a living Faith*, p. 214]. ||||
 "People today must come to realize the power contained in the tongue and channel it to the saving of mankind rather than using it to destroy, defame, and demean. ... Peter Commanday, an instructor in the New York City schools' Division of School Safety, is one of the compilers of a dictionary of slang, to be used by the city's educators in order to be able to understand and control their highly colloquial and often unruly students. He is quoted in the following newspaper story: 'Educators and other school personnel must understand the lingo because much of the violence and other trouble in school begins with talk. The human tongue, Commanday insists, 'is the most volatile, dangerous weapon brought into a school building'" [James E. Rogers, "The Power and Evil of the Unrestrained Tongue," in *Studies in James*, edited by Dub McClish, p. 144]. **and setteth on fire the course of nature**—"There is much discussion as to what this phrase means. ... It seems to me that James was simply saying that if one allows his tongue to be unrestrained, the effects will reach into every part of his life. This is certainly proved by everyday experience. A wrong word scorches or consumes and the effects are felt for many years to come" [Ibid, p. 149].

3:7... is tamed and hath been tamed—"...(damazetai, present passive indicative) is, literally, 'is continually being tamed.' The dominion which Adam was to exercise over all the animals was not to be limited to him, or to his day; it was to be exercised by mankind through all succeeding ages. ... *Though able to subdue the brute creation, man does not always control himself!*" [Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, p. 167-68].

3:8... the tongue can no man tame—"... he did not mean (a) that man, being unable to control his tongue, is therefore excused for any abuses which may result from its improper use; nor (b) that God assigns an impossible task, yet demands that it be done. ... It may be successfully restrained for forty years, but in an unguarded moment leap out a dangerous and hurtful thing. This statement of James was intended to teach us that we must ever exercise ceaseless vigilance in all matters pertaining to the tongue" [Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, p. 168].

3:12... "The fig, the olive, and the vine were the three chief natural products of Palestine. James' appeal to these familiar objects is another instance of his ability to draw needed spiritual lessons from the material world around him" [D. Edmond Hiebert, *Tests of a living Faith*, p. 225].

3:15... This wisdom descendeth not from above—"In 1 Corinthians 1–2, Paul, in rebuking the quarreling Corinthians, makes a clear distinction between two kinds of wisdom: 'the wisdom of the world' (1:20; 2:5-6) and 'the wisdom of God' (1:24; 2:7)" [D. Edmond Hiebert, *Tests of a living Faith*, p. 231].

3:17... without partiality—"It is formed from the common verb *diakrino*, basically meaning 'to divide,' with the letter *alpha* prefixed, giving it a negative quality. ... the meaning is that this wisdom acts consistently; it does not take one position in one circumstance and another in a different one. It is then the direct opposite of the duplicity of an uncontrolled tongue as described in verses 9-12" [D. Edmond Hiebert, *Tests of a living Faith*, p. 236].

3:18... fruit of righteousness is sown in peace—"It is the responsibility of all—particularly teachers and preachers—to cultivate peace by sowing good deeds which are expressions of righteousness. The fruit of righteousness is a holy life. This is sown in peace, not in strife, conflict, and war. Peace is conducive to the spread of the truth, and

contributes to it; whereas, strife, division, faction, and partyism hinder and restrain it. Here, again, we observe the close connection between the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:9; Js 3:18)” [Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, p. 196].

II. Chronology.

BIBLE PERIOD: The Period of the Church.

“The letter presupposes that the name Christian had already been given (Acts 11:26), and was, by the enemies of Christ and Christians, being blasphemed (Js 2:7). This would eliminate the possibility that it was written before A.D. 40. Moreover, it was after the great wave of persecution which swept over the church under the direction of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1ff), because those to whom James wrote were suffering persecution. In view of the fact that there were fatherless children, needy widows, and poverty-stricken brethren in abundance at the time of writing (Js 1:27; 2:15-18), and since there was a great dearth in Judaea about A.D. 44, and still another wave of suffering by poor saints in the later years of the fifth decade, the Letter would appear to have been written in one or the other of these periods” [Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, p. 18].

III. Summary.

This chapter begins with a warning to teachers. Obviously it would not be the design of James to discourage faithful Christians from being teachers, but rather to help them contemplate the seriousness of the work of teaching. Next James discusses the importance of caution in the use of the tongue which is a small member, but can cause tremendous harm when it proceeds out of control. It is obvious that James had been influenced by the teaching of Jesus in that he uses many simple illustrations from familiar day-to-day experience to bring across his points, just as Jesus had done in His teaching. In verses 9-12, there is a powerful description of a problem often present in our lives—INCONSISTENCY in the use of the tongue. How wrong it is to use the tongue to praise the Lord in holy tones and then go out and curse our fellow human beings who are made in the image of God! James tells us that the truly wise man is the one who demonstrates his wisdom by the way he lives. Also, the person whose life is characterized by bitter envying and strife is following a wisdom that is earthly, sensual, and devilish. A beautiful description is given of TRUE WISDOM.

IV. Outline.

1. Teachers have a heavy responsibility (James 3:1).
2. The relationship between maturity and control of the tongue (2).
3. The need for control of the tongue (3-6).
4. The difficulty of controlling the tongue (7-8).
5. The tongue can be inconsistent (9-12).
6. True and false wisdom (13-18).

V. Questions.

True or False

01. _____ The tongue can be tamed.
02. _____ Wisdom from above is first pure.
03. _____ James likens the tongue to the bit that is in the horse’s mouth.
04. _____ Salt water and fresh water does not come from the same fountain.
05. _____ Men are made after the similitude of God.

Multiple Choice (Select the BEST Answer)

06. _____ That wisdom which does not come from above is earthly, sensual, and: (a) devilish; (b) damning; (c) destructive.
07. _____ A big ship can be turned by a very small: (a) man; (b) helm; (c) wheel.
08. _____ Blessing and cursing from the same mouth is something that ought: (a) to be stopped; (b) to continue; (c) not so to be.
09. _____ In this chapter about the tongue, the word CONVERSATION is used to mean: (a) words spoken between one or more people; (b) behavior.
10. _____ (a) Confusion; (b) Every evil work; (c) happiness; (d) a & b—is the result of envying and strife.

Fill in the Blanks

11. “My brethren, be not many _____ ...”
12. “Behold how _____ a matter a little _____ kindleth.”
13. “But the _____ can no man _____; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly _____.”
14. The wisdom that comes from above is first _____.
15. A bit is a _____ thing in comparison to the large body of a horse.

Each Question is worth 7 Points

My Score is: _____

Answers will be found on next week's handout

Answers to James 2 Questions... [(1) False, Js 2:24; (2) True, Js 2:12; (3) True, Js 2:21,25; (4) True, Js 2:7; (5) True, Js 2:23; (6) b, Js 2:26; (7) c, Js 2:5; (8) a, Js 2:16; (9) b, Js 2:13; (10) a, Js 2:22; (11) worthy, Js 2:7; (12) works, faith, only, Js 2:24; (13) profit, works, Js 2:14; (14) respect, persons, Js 2:1; (15) works, Js 2:18.]

VI. Lessons & Applications.

- 1. be not many masters** (James 3:1). Some in the early church wanted to be teachers before they knew anything themselves (1 Tm 1:6-7). If we keep in mind that James 1:1 indicates that this epistle was sent mainly to Christians of a Jewish background, we will also realize that the teacher in the assembly of the church (for these recipients) took the place of the Jewish Rabbi. The Jewish Rabbi was treated with the utmost respect (e.g., It was held that a man's duty to his Rabbi exceeded his duty to his parents). His very name means, “MY GREAT ONE.” It was considered by the Jews an especially pious and meritorious work to take a Rabbi into the household and see to his every need. Because of this background, it was very easy for teaches to develop prideful spirits, and enter into the work of teaching without considering its weighty responsibilities. There are at least two major problems to be avoided by the Bible teacher: (1) Distorting the truth by twisting truth or teaching one's own opinions (Gal 1:6-9; 2 Pet 2:1); (2) Contradicting his teaching by his manner of life (Rom 2:21-22; Gal 2:4). James would have all Christians to consider very carefully the grave and serious responsibility which rests on the shoulders of one who would teach God's Word.
- 2. ...able to bridle the whole body** (Js 3:2). This verse seems to present the matter of controlling the tongue to us as a great challenge or goal to pursue. It is stating that it is one of the most difficult matters of Christian living to control our tongues and that when we have become successful in gaining such control, we should be able to do many great things.
- 3. ...bits in the horses' mouth ... turned with a very small helm...** (Js 3:3-4). The obvious comparison here in these two illustrations is SIZE. A bit is very small in

comparison to the massive body of a horse; a helm is very small in comparison to the rest of a ship; the tongue is small in comparison to the rest of the human body.

However, even though these three items are, relatively speaking, small, we must not discount the POWER each of the three represent. We need to think along these lines regarding the use of our tongues and be sure that we understand the power for good or evil that our words have. The Christian is to avoid certain uses of the tongue: (1) Cursing (Ex 20:7; Eph 4:29; Ps 111:9; Mt 6:9); (2) Slang (Col 3:8; Eph 5:11; 1 Ths 5:22); (3) Filthy Stories (Eph 4:29; Col 3:8); (4) Jesting [i.e., telling that which suggests evil]—Eph 5:3-4. Jesus warns that we must give account for the words which we use (Mt 12:36-37).

4. **...how great a matter a little fire kindleth** (Js 3:5). In the illustration of the bridle and the rudder, there is CONTROLLED effect, but here the illustration is of UNCONTROLLED effect. It takes only one little match to destroy the most beautiful home! On carelessly tossed cigarette can wipe out a forest. How much more serious is the damage done by the wicked, uncontrolled tongue!
5. **...full of deadly poison** (Js 3:8). This may be a reference to Ps 140:3. While fire is an open force (easily recognized), poison is a subtle force. Poison would be a good word to describe the deadly work of a vicious tongue. Gossip, slander, and backbiting would fall under the category of being illustrated by the word POISON!
6. **Therewith bless we God, ... and therewith curse we men** (Js 3:9). The very same tongues which so often blessed God were the very same tongues and mouths which cursed fellowmen. In verses 9-12 James very powerfully points out the inconsistency of doing this. Many a man speaks with perfect courtesy to strangers or business customers, but then snaps with impatient irritability at his own family. It has not been unknown for a woman to speak with sweet graciousness at a worship assembly and then to go outside to murder someone's reputation with a gossipy tongue. James wants his readers to see and understand HOW FOOLISH and INCONSISTENT and DISPLEASEING TO GOD it is for men to offer praises to Him on the one hand and then to curse man. God has not left us without guidelines for acceptable use of the tongue (Js 1:19; Js 2:12; 1 Pt 3:10; Js 1:26). The lesson here is that blessing and cursing from the same mouth reveal that the blessing is corrupted.
7. **...let him show out of a good conversation...** (Js 3:13). The truly wise man will show his wisdom through the good life that he lives. James teaches in verse 13 that if one has wisdom, then it will be demonstrated in the life that he lives: (1) Evidence when false wisdom is in control (vv. 14-16); (2) Evidence when true wisdom is in control (vv. 17-18). Bitter and arrogant wisdom is very different from real wisdom. When meekness is not present, this is evidence that wisdom is not present as well. One of the words that Jesus used to describe Himself was the word MEEK (Mt 11:29). We must follow His example by imitating His meekness in our relations with fellowmen (1 Pt 2:21). The tongue is certainly a very powerful member. The exercise of self-control in the use of it MUST be our constant task all the days of our lives. **“In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride: but the lips of the wise shall preserve them”** (Proverbs 14:3).

VII. Seek-A-Word Puzzle.

R F V C D E W S X A P Q A Z X S A E D C
 V S A M E M O U T H R O U G H T N O T V
 F F R T G B N H Y U O E D C X G D S W T
 O Q A Z C D E R F V C B G T N Y C N H O
 U N H Y T G B V F R E E D I C D U W Q B
 N S E N D F O R T H E Q S A L Z R X S E
 T E A D C V F R T G D S B E V F S T G B
 A N H M U Y I K L O E P I I U J I M J Y
 I H N B E G T S R L T Y E D C X N S W Q
 N A N Z X P G C B D H E R F V B G T G B
 F B G O W I L S X T S A L T W A T E R C
 V I X U F R F A O E D C X S W Q A Z X A
 V F G E B O N B C B T G Y H N M J U I N
 K I N T U J U S W E E T W A T E R J M D
 N I H Y R T G N B V A N D B I T T E R F
 V C D E W E Q A T Z X S W E D C V F R R
 B G T Y H B E A R A H N M J U I O P R E
 V O L I V E B E R R I E S V F R E D C S
 V F R T G B N H Y U J N B G T E W Q A H
 Z X S W E D C V F R T G B N H Y U D R L

[The highlighted words can be found above. They may be backwards, diagonal, upside down, etc. See if you can find them all. The more you use the words of the Bible, the greater blessed you will be! You might be surprised at how much this little exercise will help you retain important truths. THANK YOU for the good effort you are putting forth in Bible study. DRL]

James 3:10-12...¹⁰Out of the SAME MOUTH PROCEEDETH BLESSING AND CURSING. My brethren, these things OUGHT NOT so TO BE.¹¹Doth a FOUNTAIN SEND FORTH at the SAME PLACE SWEET WATER AND BITTER?¹²Can the FIG TREE, my brethren, BEAR OLIVE BERRIES? either a VINE, FIGS? so can NO FOUNTAIN BOTH YIELD SALT WATER AND FRESH.

ANAGRAMS: Seven four-letter words can be formed from the letters of the word TONGUE. Can you find them all?... (1) _____; (2) _____; (3) _____; (4) _____; (5) _____; (6) _____; (7) _____.